

Appendix III

ASF Version

The Kindest

Sonya Larson

When I was dying, people were nicer to me. Nurses washed my hair. Old teachers and old roommates and total randoms came to see me, kissing my bandaged hand. Bao brought me underwear and slept beside me on a chair. Mom flew from Philly, Dad from North Dakota, and Sui from Xian, all the way across the planet. The flowers! The questions! *What hurts? How much?* I was scared, and they wanted to hear all about it. No one said, *Why?* or *How come?* or *How could you?* No one rolled their eyes or said, *Well I'd better get going.* They didn't let me smoke, but I saw them mull it over, as if to say, *Well it isn't going to kill her.* They leaned forward. They were riveted. They were hungry and I was their food.

Getting born must be like that. If you could remember. But you can't.

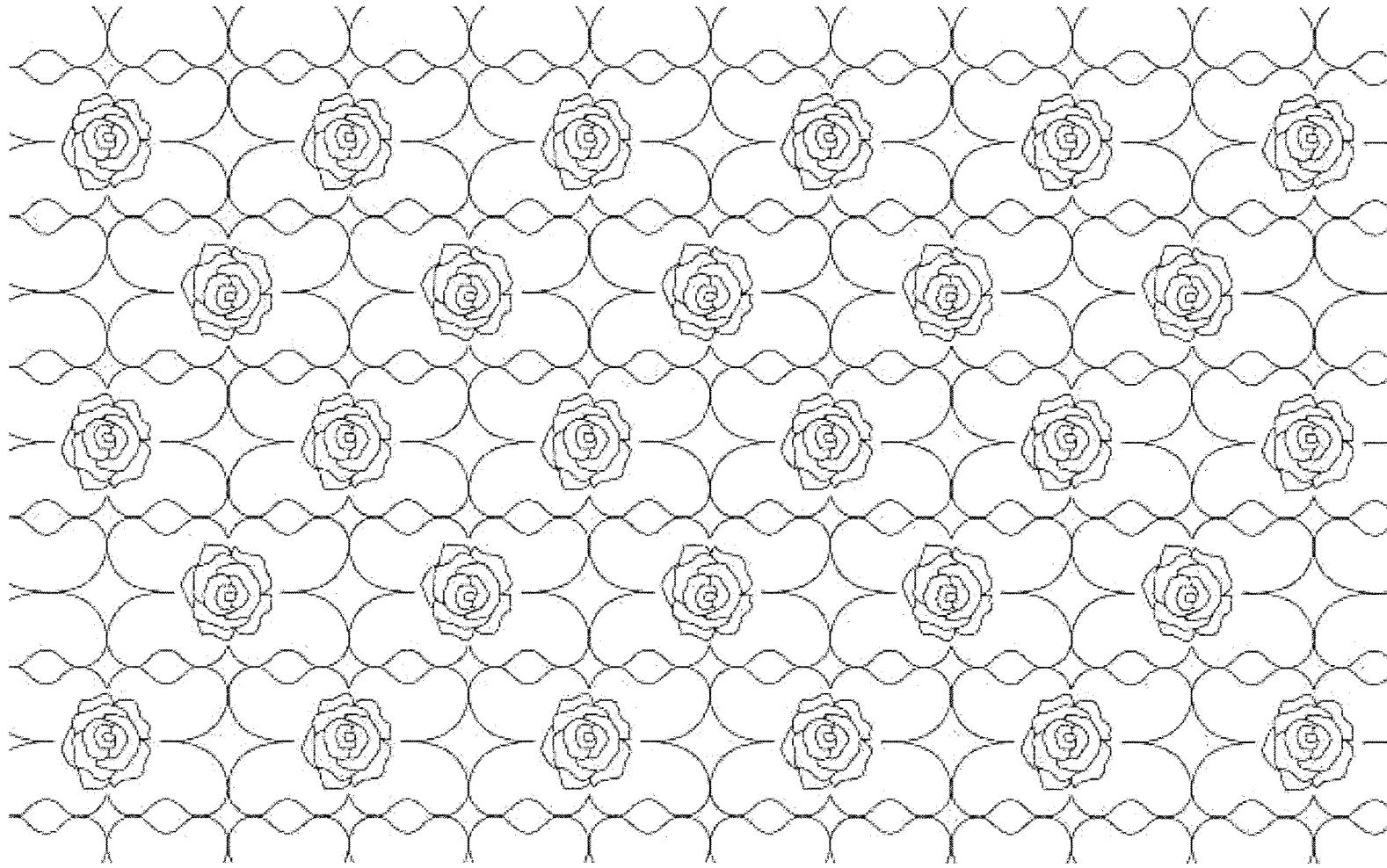
Then along came my Angel. A real one, too, no accident of her own, no sudden-onset anything. She wasn't dead, and she wasn't even doing a chain thing, aimed ultimately at saving her husband or her sister or her very best bud.

It was just that she had two kidneys, and she needed only one. And on top of that, grinned the surgeon: we matched.

That night a thin tube dripped cold dreams into my elbow. Bao squeezed my fingers and kissed the cross around his neck. "It's happening," he said.

It's happening? I tried to speak but my throat felt stuffed with rags. Beyond my eyelids Bao stammered mutely, like a face in a flipbook. I counted backward and drifted down a valley of misty waterfalls.

A finger snapped. I woke to the sight of my husband crying into his



hands, overwhelmed like I've never seen him. "Bao?" said my voice.

"Baby?" He leapt from his chair and wedged his eager arms underneath me, and we were laughing, and the laughter felt strange traveling up my lungs, like a language I was remembering only now. Even the ceiling looked new: large tiles sprayed freely with black dots of so many shapes and sizes. I could see in them intricate patterns, like constellations in stars. Bao looked up too, but his eyes were somewhere else. "How can we ever thank her?" he said, so joyful he was enraged. "How? How?"

The people gathered around me. They shook the surgeon's hand, clinked champagne over my bed. It spilled on the sheet, it spilled on me. Night came. The people left. They said. *Thank God this was behind us.* They said, *It's time we got some rest.* Bao pried my fingers off his arm as nurses rolled me behind curtains, putting a tube in my hand, with a button for trouble. Lights went dark, fans slowed to a stop. A janitor wheeled a bucket down a hall. And there was I: blinking fool, alone in my anger just like they always wanted. At 3:13 a.m. I started buzzing on the tube—listening for echoes, for shouts, for footsteps come running. I buzzed and buzzed. I jammed it with my thumb. I wanted to know didn't anybody give a shit.

I got better. They brought me home. I learned to angle my wheelchair, then stand, take a step. Weeks went by—four long months—strength creeping into my neck, my arms, my back. Bao whirred loose the screws of the handrails. Little dark holes remained in the walls, damp with stray fibers, and when I touched them I remembered where the smooth cold metal had been. I found the Mount Rushmore coffee mug, rolled behind the washing machine and miraculously intact. Even my hands hardened with muscle. On my pelvis a new scar stretched in a cracked smile. I poked it when I sat on the toilet, the pain underneath still tender. Who's in there? I thought. Who are you?

Okay. So we no longer had a car. But Bao didn't seem angry. Instead he was grateful, dutiful, the person he used to be. He poured me my Froot Loops. He borrowed a bicycle and used that. I was still sleeping on the rollaway, worried that somehow I'd now be bad at sex. But Bao didn't seem to mind. Instead he looked at me each day like I was worth something immeasurable. After a while I started getting the hang of that too.

Little things amazed me. The smooth curves of the teakettle, dotted

with moisture.

Tree needles, sprayed out and brushing the window in a breeze.

More and more the hospital seemed far away: its shiny boxes, relentlessly clean.

From the basement Bao brought up Grandma's zitan chair. He slid off the sheet, eased it to the table, smoothed its legs with a damp silver cloth. I lowered myself onto the bony cushion, thumbing the grooves of dragon tails that curled down the armrests. Suddenly the chair seemed too big for me, too grand. But that was ridiculous—when Grandma was alive she would fart all over this thing. I scooched my butt, got comfy. Bao folded up the wheelchair. To the curb went the crutches, the walker, both canes. We could have recycled them or given them away, but we liked watching the garbage men hurl them into the truck, those grimy walls descending to slurp them up for good.

Right about then the letter shows up.

Bao was at work. It was a sunny, ignorant day.

It came in the mailbox: real envelope and paper and gold sticker sealing the flap. It was wrapped in a second letter from the surgeon, his boxy hand-writing rushed with loops of fervor. So awestruck was he by the selflessness involved that he just had to chapterone the missive himself. I looked at his letter. I thought that doctors couldn't write at all, not even their own names. Then came hers. She had used a notepad shaped like a daisy. Blue gel pen.

Dear Recipient,

My name is Rose Rothario. I'm a thirty-eight-year-old white female, and I live in Greater Boston.

In 2017 I saw a documentary about altruistic kidney donation, and as the credits rolled I felt wholly dismayed by the daily experiences of those in need. Equipped with this new awareness, I set forth on a journey to offer a great gift, to do my part in bettering a fellow human's life.

I shook open the letter. Six whole daisy pages. Stuff about her surgery, the prep, the PT. It went on.

I'm so grateful to the MGH transplant team, who held my hand from my very first blood test to the date of our paired exchange. I myself know something of suffering, but from those experiences I've acquired both courage and perseverance. I've also learned to appreciate the hardship that others are going through, no matter how foreign. Whatever you're

endured, remember that you are never alone.
A few things about me: I like sailing, camping, jewelry, and cats. As I prepared to make this donation, I drew strength from knowing that my recipient would get a second chance at life. I withstood the pain by imagining and rejoicing in YOU.

I stared at the YOU, underlined three times.

*Now I smile at the thought that you are enjoying renewed health. You deserve all that life has to offer, simply because you exist.
 If you are willing, I would love to know more about you. Perhaps we could meet. But if you prefer not to, I accept that reaction as well.*

Warmly,

Rose M. Rothario

There was a photograph. She was tall, slender, a bursting ponytail harvested to one side. Scissors had cut away the image near her shoulder, as if to remove somebody who'd been standing beside her. I held it to my nose, but it just smelled like a photograph: paper and faint glue, with no whiff of a particular person. She was at some county fair. She was around my age. She was standing by a Tilt-A-Whirl, surrounded by blurry feet, holding a rainbow-swirled lollipop in her fist.

So her name was Rose.

I wanted a cigarette.

But I didn't have one. Bao was at work. Sui was in Xian, obviously asleep. Dad in Bismarck and Mom in Philly, but they had never been any help at all.

I hobbled to the kitchen, opened the cupboard. A stupid move—what did I expect? No car and no booze. I looked for the mouthwash, the vanilla extract, that vial of Estée Lauder. But Bao had done a full sweep. I sat on the couch. I breathed in and out.

At some point Bao came home. I woke to see him scanning the letter sprayed across the table, wearing red bike shorts circled with sweat. Bao in bike shorts! He looked like no one I knew. Just a stranger pausing to examine a map. He read the whole thing standing up, helmet still on. “Wow,” he said, blinking at the wall.

“I know,” I said.

“Where did she come from?”

“How should I know?” I said, sounding ugly. But Bao didn't seem to hear; he was glancing frantically around our house.

“We need to do something,” he said. “We need to show our thanks.”

“Of course,” I said, though that wasn't what I'd been thinking at all. But all of this gratitude: it shut me up.

There was some debate over who should make the call. “Can you do it?” I said. “Can you say I'm still recovering?”

Bao frowned and unclicked his helmet. He pulled at the Velcro straps on his gloves. Okay: I could see that he didn't want to. But when I was dying he'd stopped saying no, and the habit—for now—was sticking. I saw indecision worming under his face. I let it. Finally he went to the kitchen and beeped forcefully at the microwave.

We washed the dishes. We dried them. Then Bao called her up. He was nervous, chewing rapidly on a wedge of Big Red that I could smell from the couch. I could see that he wanted a drink. I hugged my knees, bending to suck the wet collar of my sweatshirt.

Bao's voice twisted to a whole new register, leaping to each sentence like he was competing for enthusiasm. “We would love, love, love to have you,” he said. I held still. Bao never love, love, loved anything. “Her name is Chuntao. That's Shun, tow-oo. No, no. It would be an honor for us.”

Arrangements were made. She would come on Thursday. Suddenly the whole house looked barbarically disarrayed—the faded curtains, outdated carpet, objects that made no sense, revealing our vulgarities. That old panicky feeling. I imagined her perched on this sagging couch, tanned legs too long to fold under the coffee table. It was too late to change the cabinets, too late to paint the trims. This wasn't a place where we chummed out with guests. This wasn't a place where people wanted to hang.

She would come at 11 a.m. “What do we get her?” said Bao, shaking his head. He laughed in choked bursts. “Your other kidney? Your spleen?”

I wanted to be sick, to hide under the table. I said that I'd better get going—there's this yoga thing at seven. “That's great, baby.” Bao smiled, startled, like someone slapped across the face. “Good for you.” He hurried his gloves back on. “I'd better get a haircut. And something we can cook.”

“Okay,” I said, standing as he left like I was about to put on my shoes. But I didn't. Instead I dropped to the couch, scanned my phone. *Did you take your Xyletene? Mom had written. U ok? said Sui. Where did u go? I ignored them all and played Angry Birds. They weren't writing to check in. They were writing to check.*

In the morning I went to the basement. Looked for something sentimental. On some boxes were a wine decanter, a stereo system, scratched roller blades, a jar of batteries. A ceramic Christmas tree that lit up, a velvet painting of John Wayne. An exercise ball with some wind chimes slumped on top. I thought about the wind chimes. They were nice, I could dust them off. But all these things had to do with me, not my Angel. She needed something that meant something. Like a pint of my own blood. Nothing worked.

I figured out the bus. I went to Target. And oh my God: the white floor tiles: so shiny! They reflected the fluorescents gleaming overhead, as if the whole place were lit from under my feet. The shopping cart wheeled over each blip of tile—so smooth. Glossy loops of blond samples downaisles of hair dye—delightful! I grabbed shampoo, a pack of Slims (oh, sweet aroma through the plastic), and a can of white paint.

I thought about a card. I went to Thank You and Thank You for Her. Fanned through the options of embossed sayings. “Life is measured not by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.” Um. Can you say no way? I stuffed them back and went to Accessories. She said she liked jewelry, so.

I loaded up. I was tearing stuff off the spinning Y-shaped displays. Clinking necklaces and heavy bangles and crystal rings and something called a toe clutch. A dozen watches—who wore watches? I had a field day. I filled my cart like they do in the movies when a shooter’s on the loose or the neighborhood’s on fire, grabbing for my Angel like I never would for myself. At checkout the glittering pile moved down the conveyor belt. The girl beeped her gun around the trash and said that’ll be \$193.80.

She looked through my face. She wanted to know did I want to put something back. Um, yeah, you think? So I came home with a pendant, the toe clutch, and two bracelets on clearance. \$34.17 total. But nobody would know. “What in God’s name?” said Bao. He found me kneeling on newspaper in the foyer, holding a paintbrush wet with harsh chemicals.

“Our trims,” I said. “They’re a wreck.” Bao breathed through his nostrils. “Baby,” he said. “This isn’t taking it easy.”

“I know, I know.” I tried getting to my feet, but pain like a snapped trap unfolded with my body. Bao grabbed my arm. I was dizzy and restless. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want her here.

“Can you move your stuff?” said Bao. I wiped down the coffee table. I gathered the crap on the staircase.

I ripped the tags off the jewelry and rummaged for a box. No box. I fetched a Gladware and buried them in there with Kleenex, pretty-like. Found an old gift certificate to Olive Garden and put that in too. Wrapped it up—technically Christmas paper, red with snowflakes, but pretty ambiguous, and anyway it was November. No card. What was I supposed to say? Bao painted some crackers with cream cheese. I warmed potato skins. “We cooked!” he said, marching the plate to the living room. I watched his excitement. I wanted a drink. Instead I went to the fridge and checked on my apple juice. Slipped into my pocket two harmless Slims.

At 10:56 a.m. the doorbell went off. Bao almost dropped the plate in his rush to the door. I stayed behind, neatening things, my fingers shaking ruddily like they belonged to someone else.

I heard her voice before I saw her. So much exclaiming, hugging, everything loud. They came gliding toward me, Bao grinning anxiously and searching my face. She was even more radiant than the photo. Slightly older-looking—crinkly eyes, thin hair—but emanating a glow that no camera could capture without filters. Out came her arm and her long, elegant hand, the delicate fingernails, tips creamy white.

“Baby?” said Bao. His eyebrows urged me on.

“Hi!” I said. “Hi hi. Come in, come in.” I guess I was staring. We shook. Her hands were cold from being outside. Mine were sweaty, and I wiped them on my pants, though I worried maybe that would look rude, like I didn’t want her germs. I watched her shoes, two sculptures of soft green suede. She was too shiny to look at. It was like squinting at the sun.

“This,” she said, eyes probing my socks, my sweatshirt, the whole of me, “is incredible.”

“Right on,” I said. “Sorry. I feel super weird right now.” The lips of Rose Rothario spread in a generous smile. “I can’t believe it: either, Chuntao. Am I saying it correctly?” I nodded that she was. She placed her hand on her chest. She gazed around our house, at our weird stuff and the carpet slashed with lines from the vacuum cleaner. Bao chatted with Rose Rothario, both nodding vigorously. The crescendo of a siren, of trucks guzzling by; the voice of Rose Rothario rose above them all. It was like a singing melody, exuberant and controlled. She stepped around our living room. Bao followed, explaining photos and stuff on the mantel, a breeze of high-pitched peaches trailing in

her wake. I felt like a zoo animal, watching onlookers shuffle to more interesting exhibits. Suddenly my arms were too long, hair was sticking to my face. At least they were moving, killing time.

“Is this a family heirloom?” Rose Rothario lifted her glasses from her nose. She bent to examine the carvings on the zitan chair.

“I guess so,” said Bao, hands folded like a docent. “It’s Chuntao’s.”

“It’s mine,” I said.

“It’s a stunning relic,” said Rose Rothario, roving her eyes along the back, the armrests, the deflated cushion. A stunning relic? It was a chair. I imagined Grandma hunched in the seat, raising her furry eyebrows, wondering, Who the hell?

Bao suggested that we sit around the coffee table. “We got some snacks,” he said. “Nothing special.”

“Oh my goodness,” said Rose Rothario, admiring the Ritz crackers fanned around the plate. I hated the sight of them: everything the same pale color. But Rose didn’t seem to care. She sat, folding her skirt and holding her abdomen on the way down. I wondered if it hurt: the hole inside of her. I wondered if she missed it. But I sort of didn’t want to know. We faced each other, the triangle of us. Nobody ate. Finally I lifted a cracker and put it in my mouth. It tasted like nothing, like water, just cold and crumbs and creamy stuff, mashing around.

“You sure don’t look like you just had surgery,” Bao said to Rose Rothario. I passed around some coasters.

“Thank you. Gosh.” She seemed to grin uncontrollably. “Everyone’s been so supportive. So many cards and flowers. And from people you’d never expect.” I went in for my apple juice. The eyes of Rose Rothario snagged on my glass, following my hand as it floated from the table to my lips. “Is that wine?” she said.

I stopped mid-sip. “No. It’s a Welch’s.”

“Oh!” she said, bursting into a nervous smile. “Ha ha ha.” She peered at Bao, then at me, then at the hands in her lap.

We were quiet. I drank my drink. And I tried to remember the things I’ve had to learn: don’t react, don’t react. I tipped back into the cushions, the air fuzzy with shapes and colors. Bao and Rose Rothario discussed the neighborhoods of Shelby—which restaurants were nice and which ones you should skip. They were talking holidays or somebody’s pet or the best commute from this place to that. “But this neighborhood is also beautiful,” she said, ridiculously. “Do you like to go for walks?”

“We’re definitely going to,” said Bao. “We’re going to get into that.”

“Not me,” I said, swirling my glass. “I’m still healing. So, yeah.”

Bao cleared his throat. Rose Rothario studied me tenderly. “Of course,” she said. “I found that yoga and gentle stretching were all I could do at first.”

“I’ve been thinking about the yoga,” I said. “But I bet I’d be bad.”

“Maybe Rose could teach you,” said Bao.

The woman’s eyes perked up. “Truly?”

He nodded and tipped his drink in her direction. “You could go together. You could show her the ropes.”

“I could show you the ropes,” said Rose, turning to smile at me. My face must have been doing something, because then she said, “Or. We could not. Whatever you prefer.”

“What? What?” Bao gaped at me, hands up in surrender. “I thought you wanted someone to go with!”

Rose waved everyone off the subject. “It’s really not important.” She smoothed her skirt. “It’s okay, Bao.” And I didn’t like her saying my husband’s name.

“Excuse me,” said Bao, and he stood up to make for the bathroom. I followed him. Inchéd open the door and slipped myself inside, where Bao was peeing into the toilet. “Are you out of your mind?” he hissed in a soft-loud voice.

I hissed back. “Yoga with her? Are you crazy? I would rather die.”

“That’s great,” said Bao, shaking and zipping his pants. “That’s just what I want to hear.” He scrambled with his buckle and pushed past me to the sink. “I happen to be thankful,” he said. “The woman saved my wife. You—you scared the shit out of me. But then she comes along and helps a person in need.”

“So I guess she’s a saint?” I said. “She’s the kindest bitch on the planet?”

“Can you just go be with her?” he said, hurrying a towel up his arms.

“Can you just go be a good person?”

“You go,” I said.

“No, you,” he said. And we stood there in the bathroom, panting and scared of the woman in our house.

We exited. In the living room Rose was sitting pin-straight on the couch, waiting just like we’d left her, like somebody’s dog.

Bao squared his eyes on Rose Rothario. He clasped his hands. His voice went soft. “Before we let another moment pass, Rose, we just want to say . . . we just want to express to you . . .” He glared in my direction.

But I couldn't say it. His angry face made me want to say nothing at all. "I think I'll leave you two alone," he said, rocking on his heels.

"What?" I said. Air leapt down my throat. "What for?"

But he wouldn't look at me. "You must have a lot to say to each other," he said and jerked on his jacket. On the couch Rose Rothario sat as still as a statue, her eyes roving between us. In my head I pleaded to my husband with every inch of my skin. Don't. Don't you dare.

But he snapped up his helmet. Rushed his feet into shoes with the ankles smashed flat. And I felt through my heart the spear that would orphan me. The click of the door left a loud and bristling silence. Like the world tipping over. I was in my living room, I was standing on the carpet, a bus rumbling by like it was any old day.

I hurried up and gave Rose her present. She practically squealed in delight, there were little tears in her eyes. I sank into the cushions as Rose lifted the pendant-long chain with a copper sunburst-and eased it over her head. She hid the Gladware in her purse, saying she'd fully relish the rest later.

"It was fun to buy," I said. "I had to figure out the bus, but that was actually totally fine."

Rose Rothario frowned, leaning forward. "Forgive me, but I was told there was an accident."

"Yup," I said.

She bit her worried lip. "That must have been terrifying."

"You bet," I said, but the truth was that I couldn't remember. I just remembered going for my stash in the basement, the icy vodka in the Mount Rushmore mug. Washing machine and stray coins vibrating across. When had I decided to go downtown? How had I even gotten to the car? It was the logic of a dream. "Trees!" I said, saluting with my glass. "They come out of nowhere."

"There was a storm?" She followed along with goony eyes.

"Big time," I lied. I described fierce winds, driving hail, windshield wipers that flapped like my hands. I marveled at my voice, making this stuff up. It sounded correct. "The dash slammed me all over. They even took out a rib—it was total smithereens." I pointed at the torso of Rose Rothario. "Hey, you got any extras in there?"

I chuckled. Rose Rothario let out a strained little laugh. Immediately

I felt terrible and wished that she would go. I thought about the cigarettes—I'd told Bao I wouldn't smoke in the house. But he had left, so.

Rose Rothario squeezed the hem of her skirt. "Has your recovery been very difficult?"

I sipped my juice. "I'm not in recovery, if that's what you're asking."

"What?" she blinked. "Oh. That's not what I mean. I hope you know that's not what I mean."

I could see that she was uncomfortable. So what? I leaned in for a cracker and put the whole thing in my mouth. "I'm great," I said. "I can walk up stairs, catch the bus."

"I do find that yoga helps," she said. "But I still can't sleep through the night."

"Me neither," I said. "I keep getting up to pee."

"I can hardly bend over to tie my shoes."

"What a bitch," I said.

Rose Rothario took a cracker and bit off an edge. She chewed in silence. More and more it seemed hard for her to look at me. Her eyes drifted to the window, to the ceiling, to her free hand in her lap. Finally she turned my way, her jaw working the cracker, but she looked right through me, as if to some far-off mountain. Then I realized. She was eyeing my torso. She was thinking about her kidney, buried inside of me. "Do take care of it," she said quietly.

"You think that I wouldn't?" I said. "No, that's not what I mean." She turned away, waving off the thought. "It's yours, of course. Never mind. It's yours now."

"Well, sort of," I said, feeling bad. "You gave it to me. It's still sort of yours." She squirmed and knocked her knees together. "Hey," I said, leaning toward her. "Don't you worry." Her head lowered, hair shielding her face. "So much is different now. I'm going to treat it so good. I'm going to take good care."

"I'm sure," she said. "Of course."

"Look," I said, "I have to be honest with you." I concentrated on the limp hand in her lap. "I'm not really looking for connections right now. Like I'm not really looking to hang out. Don't get me wrong: I am way grateful. Like one hundred percent. But I've got too many friends already. I can barely keep up."

"Oh, no no no," she said. "I'm not interested in friendship."

"Like I don't want to offend you, but."

“I just wanted to meet you,” she said. “I just thought it would be a meaningful experience.”

“It is,” I said. “No doubt.”

I looked up. She was chewing and cupping her palm to catch the crumbs. My heart pooled with relief. I’d said what I needed to. Now she could leave. But she didn’t. She kept on munching her cracker like that. What was she waiting for? What did she want? “Is there something that you want?” I said. And that’s when the face of Rose Rothario blotted and crumpled. Her eyes squeezed up, her hair fell forward. She was crying into her hand. The other hand pinched her bitten cracker, keeping it aloft. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s all just so much.”

I didn’t know what was happening. What I thought was: What is this, this white woman, crying on my couch? Crying to me. I felt bad for her, but I also wanted to slap her. Instead I leaned forward and put my hand on Rose Rothario’s knee. It was warm, shivering, faceted with bone.

Her mouth contorted with sobs, articulating nothing. But I knew what she was thinking. She was thinking it was supposed to be different. “I hear you,” I said quietly. “When I was dying, people were nicer.” Rose Rothario swallowed. “What—what are you saying?” She was whimpering now, fingers pressed into her eyes like she didn’t want to look. I saw my hand and I saw her knee. But they weren’t as sharp as the thought in my head. That when I was dying none of it mattered: what I’d done or what I was. People bared their love and I thought I had my hands on it. “I can’t explain,” I said. “Things were different. But now . . .”

Rose Rothario uncovered her shiny, bloated face. Then her fingers fluttered down, and with no warning at all they rested themselves on my hand. I flinched. Her skin was cold, hovering and weightless, but I still could feel the warmth of her, pinning me.

“Have you told people about me?” she said.

I was tense, dutiful, careful not to move. “Of course,” I said.

“And what do they say?” Her eyes glistened, as if from hunger.

What do they say? Just: eager things, stunned things. Like people who’d glimpsed promised lands or had been spared by magnificent storms. “All the things you’d expect,” I said.

Rose Rothario let out a strange, sloppy laugh.

“Come on,” I said. “People worship you. That’s pretty clear.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, squinting as if from pain. Then the waterworks started up again. “Never mind,” I said, sliding out my hand

and rubbing my muscles. My wrist bones shifted, accompanying her sad song. I covered them, didn’t look at her. Maybe I’d just wait this one out.

But after a while Rose Rothario quieted. She reached around for the Gladware and fetched some Kleenex, dabbed her eyes. “I’ll tell you what I would like. I would love to have a photo with you.” She smiled weakly through her wet face. “That would mean a lot to me. To the people in my life.”

I imagined my face immortalized next to Rose Rothario’s. I didn’t like this move. But if that’s what it took to get her out, to get on. “If it means a lot to you,” I said.

She rose. Balled the Kleenex in her fist and looked for the spot that she wanted. I watched her circle the living room, thinking, It’s okay. It’ll only take a second. She traced her steps around the foyer, the mantel, the photos on the wall. But I knew what she was after. She curled her hands on it. My chair.

I hesitated. “You’re not going to post this somewhere, are you?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Never.”

“Then no,” she said. I stood, shuffled over. The blackwood gleamed with the white lines of lighted grooves. “Do you want to sit in it?” she offered.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. But then I changed my mind. “Actually, yes. I want to sit in it.” I lowered myself onto the knotty cushion. I rested my elbows. Beside me Rose Rothario crouched down, touching the armrest for balance.

“Careful,” I said.

“Wow—how old is this?”

“Old,” I said. Rose Rothario knelt on the carpet. She smelled like peach shampoo. There were squiggle grays in her hair and a bumpy mole behind her ear.

She fussed with her phone, stuck out her arm. I didn’t know where to look until she angled it toward me and I saw our faces looking back. The photo would be fuzzy, rough with sediments of darkness, but I knew that she would treasure it always. Because the thing about the dying is they command the deepest respect, respect like an underground river resonant with primordial sounds, the kind of respect that people steal from one another.

“Ready?” she said. And we peered into her outstretched hand. I saw my grandma’s chair. I saw the face of Rose Rothario. I saw that mine was smiling, next to hers forever.